

April 12th, 2024 Cambria Forest Committee meeting summary

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Crosby Swartz at 10:03 AM. In attendance were Treasurer Laura Swartz, CFC Board member Julie Jorgensen, Friends of the Fiscalini Ranch Preserve (FFRP) Executive Director Kitty Connolly, Greenspace Vice President and Board member Donelle Morgan, CCSD Board member and Parks, Recreation and Open Space (PROS) Chair Michael Thomas, NCAC Land Use Committee member and Environmental Representative Christina Galloway, Cambria resident Dennis Dudzik, and CCSD Board member and CFC liaison Harry Farmer.

Crosby began with an announcement regarding an interesting sounding Webinar being presented on April 24th regarding Indigenous Forestry practices, also mentioning the Zoom link he sent out in an email. Next FFRP Executive Director Kitty Connolly described an upcoming Bio Blitz for Pollinators one day event in September involving local groups FFRP, Greenspace and Camp Ocean Pines, which would provide an opportunity for various County non profits to gather together, discuss the natural areas in Cambria, including the Fiscalini Ranch, Strawberry Canyon and Fern Canyon, and obtain as much pollinator data as possible.

Laura Swartz provided the Treasurer's Report, including that CFC is up to date on all their government reporting. The IRS data is due on May 15th as CFC is a non profit, and the needed information is being provided to our local accountant for submittal.

As for Organization Reports. No one was available from the California Native Plant Society local chapter. And while likewise no one was present to represent the Cambria Fire Safe Focus Group, Michael Thomas suggested checking reports on the CCSD and NCAC Agenda's for more current information from the FSFG and other organizations. Kitty reported that the Cal Fire Forest Health Grant had successfully obtained \$6.7 million for the San Luis Obispo Fire Safe Council, thereby providing funding for the Fiscalini Ranch, Greenspace, Rancho Marino and other local projects. The process will take about five years, and will include both invasive plant removal as well as tree planting. Turns out this is the first Forest Health Grant SLO County has ever gotten, which was quite uplifting. No information was available regarding the Fire Safety Grant which was a separate proposal. And while much appreciation was expressed regarding the work to be done through the grant funding, there was concern for the balance between plant and tree removal and replacement of and with native vegetation.

Greenspace representative Donelle Morgan reminded us of the celebratory Earth Day event at the Greenspace Creekside Reserve on Sunday, April 21st. This will be the most expansive local Earth Day happening ever, with information and activities for folks of all ages. Sound like a great time!!

Introductions then briefly took place all around for the new attendees. It was again noted that many other usual representatives, including from Rancho Marino and the US-LT RCD were not available for today's meeting.

Crosby made a short comment about a web site that estimates the value of trees titled "iTree", where folks can perhaps obtain financial assistance in planting trees, but mostly ascertaining a dollar value on trees already in the ground. He noted there is much software available that could be useful in providing valuable information on trees. The question was also posed as to how do you put a dollar value on trees. Julie Jorgensen responded that court cases have often needed to establish the value of a tree on private property when damage has been done by a neighbor, or some other similar circumstance that affects the value of one's home and/or property. Donelle then stated she'd gone to the web site, and what iTree does mostly is determine the value of trees focusing on how a tree holds the soil together, withstands storm waters, cleans the air and fights pollution, and these are the main measuring devices iTree is using. As a member of the NCAC Land Use committee, Christina Galloway then spoke to how applications for home additions can include the removal of trees from the property, often to improve one's view or increase square footage.

PROS Chair Michael Thomas then addressed the CFC Agenda item regarding Forest Management Topics to be reported to the PROS Committee. Crosby clarified the intention here was for CFC meeting attendees to bring up Forest Management topics they are concerned with that can then be referred to PROS.

The discussion then turned to the recently defined CCSD 2024 Fire Hazard Fuel Reduction Program. Crosby stated this mostly applies to selected vacant properties mainly to comply with the defensible space requirements of Cal Fire. Crosby states his main concern is that some of these properties are in the middle of forest preserves such as Fern Canyon, and are nowhere near houses or other structures as opposed to being connected to “improved” properties. He expressed his additional concern that the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo, who holds the Conservation Easement on many of these properties, may not be aware of the potential tree and other plant removal that may take place. Laura added that often more natural growth is being removed than needed, adding to the cost of the FHFRRP. What is needed is a compromise that addresses forest health as much as fire safety. Michael added that CCSD Facilities and Resources Supervisor David Aguirre has been in touch with the Land Conservancy, and they are mostly in agreement with the efforts of the District.

Laura as Treasurer then spoke to the possibility of obtaining grant funding from the Cambria Community Council for small projects, creating some visibility in this area, then ultimately having the CFC apply for larger grants on their own. Previous projects were mentioned, including the printing of the very colorful Invasive Weed Guide written by local talented writer Christine Heinrichs. Kitty then suggested making the Weed Guide available again, perhaps even updating it for new arrivals to Cambria who are unaware of the harm done by invasives such as French Broom that are being sold at some nurseries and planted by less educated folks because they like the appearance.

Crosby then briefly brought up the UC Berkeley Fire Surrogate Study that has been minimally discussed as an Agenda item in the past. He said at some point information in this study would be used in future Forest Management Studies. The Swartz’s then acknowledged and thanked Michael Thomas, the recent new Chair of the PROS Committee, for redirecting the Committee from an emphasis on parks and recreation to a greater focus on open space and forest health.

The discussion then returned to again making the Invasive Weed Guide available, including obtaining a grant to do so and updating it, keeping in mind the ultimate focus of the CFC is improved forest health and educating the community. The comment was made it would also be helpful to find out what places in town would be interested in having the Guide available for purchase.

Just as Crosby was about to end the meeting, Christina posed the question: Is there a single greatest issue threatening the forest that she can incorporate into her Environmental Report at next week’s NCAC meeting? Crosby stated the issue of concern is that the Fire Agencies see the forest as fuel, and they want to reduce the number of trees. As a result, the number of trees in Cambria, especially in the forested areas, is going down, yet this tactic does little to nothing to reduce fire danger. The focus should be on home hardening, incorporating true and time tested techniques to limit fire danger around one’s home. The philosophy of Indigenous Peoples addressing forest health and limiting the danger of fire by harmoniously interacting with and relating to Mother Earth was addressed. A thoughtful, rich and meaningful discussion then took place involving all attendees.

At one point Donelle brought to our attention a book titled “The Forests of California” by Obbie Kaufmann, which seriously addresses the issues we’d been discussing. She said he is a great speaker, and Greenspace is hoping to bring him to Cambria sometime in October. She also recommended reading the book, as it ideally addresses the concerns of the Cambria Forest Committee.

The final observation was that the key to Forest Health is creating a healthy forest using wisdom and cultivating a insightful relationship with Nature.

The meeting was adjourned by Crosby at 11:11 AM. The next CFC meeting will be Friday, May 11th at 10AM via Zoom.

This summary written and submitted by CCSD Board Director and CFC liaison Harry Farmer.